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## Feds leave Loop 202 to ADOT

**Corinne Purtill**  
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Federal Highway Administration officials say they're letting the state take the lead in planning Loop 202, the South Mountain Freeway, including negotiations with the Gila River Indian Community on potentially routing it onto tribal land.

The federal agency has not directly contacted the tribe to discuss the route, relying instead on Arizona Department of Transportation officials to broker any possible agreement.

"Since this becomes an ADOT facility, it really becomes an ADOT responsibility to take the lead in those efforts," said Bill Vachon, senior area engineer with FHWA.

Vachon and Bob Hollis, the Arizona division administrator for FHWA, spoke earlier this week at the agency's downtown Phoenix offices.

Late last month, FHWA stamped its approval on ADOT's decision to route the western leg of the South Mountain Freeway along 55th Avenue.

FHWA has been involved with the project since 2001, the year a mandatory study was launched to make the South Mountain Freeway eligible for federal funding.

The federal agency is the body that will issue the final record of decision on the freeway, anticipated in late 2007. That document gives approval to the location and design of the freeway. ADOT is then responsible for making the \$1.7 billion project a reality.

Though the route isn't official until that record of decision is issued, the 55th Avenue alignment will almost certainly be the western route, Hollis said.

With that question resolved, the state and federal government must turn their attention to the eastern alignment, now proposed along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee Foothills.

ADOT likely won't choose an eastern route until a final environmental impact statement is released in late 2007.

The only alternative location for the eastern segment would be Gila River Reservation land. The Gila River Indian Community has not yet consented to any study on its land.

Though it is letting ADOT take the lead in negotiations with the tribe about the eastern alignment, FHWA has been in some talks with Gila River regarding South Mountain Park.

As currently planned, the South Mountain Freeway would clip the western end of South Mountain Park, forcing engineers to blast through that part of the mountain.

The mountain is of great cultural importance to the Gila River Indian Community. Cutting through the mountain could be avoided by routing part of the road onto the reservation, a move that would have to be approved by the tribe, Vachon said.

Last year, FHWA has sent letters to all tribes in Arizona, asking them to identify any culturally important sites that could be affected by the freeway.

Former community Gov. Richard Narcia sent the agency a letter in September expressing concern about the effect on areas including South Mountain Park.

In November, the FHWA sent a letter back saying that its agency and ADOT acknowledged their concerns and were recommending the South Mountain for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, Hollis said.

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